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ABSTRACT

Levy-election results frequently mean the difference between the curtailment or expansion of educational services. This paper presents results of a study that explored the feasibility of using exit polling as an alternative way to assess voter attitudes in an urban school-district levy election. Background information is provided on two levy campaigns that were defeated in Washington Local School District (WLS), an independent school district in Toledo, Ohio. School officials and supporters of the levies conducted exit polling to help plan for a new levy election. Forty-five educational-administration graduate students administered surveys to voters at 29 election sites during a May 3, 1988, levy-renewal election. Out of approximately 10,000 total voters, 792 voters, completed surveys. The data can be used to show the distribution of supportive voters in various polling areas and to target favorable or unsure populations in the district. Findings also indicated an association between voters' lack of knowledge about the district's financial condition and rejection of the new levy proposal. Exit polling is an approach that can provide information needed to increase the effectiveness of school tax campaign strategies. Given the finite resources of time, money, and energy available for campaign spending, the practical importance of supporting decisions with accurate data is underscored. Five tables are included. (Contains 10 references.) (LMI)

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Use of the Exit Poll Survey to Improve Levy Campaign Planning

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Use of the Exit Poll Survey to Improve Levy Campaign Planning

Accurate knowledge of a decision-maker's attitudes toward an issue can be invaluable. Results from opinion polls taken prior to election day are often used to guide campaign planning. For school districts in approximately 40% of the states, the outcome of levy elections can be crucial. Election results frequently mean the difference between curtailment or expansion of educational services. For many Ohio school districts, growth in local revenue is almost entirely dependent upon voter approval of property tax increases. The passage of a local property tax limitation measure in 1976, House Bill 920, has effectively prevented districts from realizing revenue increases from inflationary growth in the value of real property. Caught between spiraling salary settlements and inadequate increases in state aid levels, districts that are unable to pass additional levies are compelled to reduce services.

Only 45% of operating levy proposals were successful during the general election in November, 1987 (Ohio Department of Education, 1987). Another recent indication of the inability of Ohio districts to generate sufficient revenue growth is signalled by 116 (out of a total of 615) school districts using money borrowed from the Emergency School Advancement Fund to fund operating expenses in Fiscal Year 1988. Of a recent group of loan applicants, 14 of 17 districts had millage below the state average.

In a careful review of research concerning voting on school financial issues, Piele and Hall (1973) reasoned that campaigning should play an important role in

the outcome of school elections. They noted that researchers generally have had difficulty in demonstrating a relationship between success or failure at the ballot box and the use of non-selective strategies such as district campaign use of mass media and voter participation drives. Continuing this line of reasoning, they suggested that school districts should invest a greater proportion of their resources in analyzing their constituency rather than attempting to influence election outcomes. In reverse order of preference, school officials can use intuition, voting and census records, and survey research to gain a better understanding of voter characteristics. The results of survey research can be used to bring the voter profile into sharper focus and allow the selective recruitment of voters who are likely to vote favorably on a school tax issue (Piele and Hall, 1973, p. 157).

Opinion polls and the study of voting records constitute the major source of information available to campaign planners. Records reveal the percentage of yes and no votes in a given precinct and in the district, but little else. Whether issues pass or fail, post-election analysis based solely on election records is primarily speculation. By contrast, surveys can be used to gather a broad range of opinions concerning an impending levy election and the reasons behind the opinions.

Usually, surveys include the centrally important question of how district residents intend to vote on the issue. However, the response to this question is not always reliable. Survey returns are typically more positive in support of school tax issues than the later election results, suggesting that respondents tend to provide a socially desirable response.

The identification of survey respondents who will actually vote in the election poses another problem well known to election research practitioners (Crespi, 1977). In fact, identifying likely voters is considered a major measurement problem in conventional pre-election polling. Professional pollsters consider this to be as significant for accuracy as sampling (Crespi, 1988). Ideally, the sample would be taken randomly from the population that will vote in the election. However, such survey samples are more properly described as having been obtained from resident adults instead of voters. The respondent may not be a registered voter, may be registered but not planning to vote, or may be registered and planning to vote, but may or may not actually vote.

Until the advent of exit polling, survey results presented the same drawbacks to the major news media. However, the exit, or election day, poll is a procedure that has replaced the survey as the primary method employed by the national news media to assess voters' characteristics, attitudes, and decisions (Levy, 1983). Since responses are obtained from voters as they exit the polling place, the problem of population verification is largely obviated. Furthermore, because responses are obtained almost immediately after votes are cast, the replies can be expected to be "especially accurate" (Levy, 1983, p. 65).

Exit polls have been used since 1967 by journalists to make projections of election results before voting has been concluded. The early projections are based on the percentage of yes and no votes reported to interviewers, and have been sufficiently accurate to provoke the argument that broadcasting the projections

before the polls are closed influences the outcome of the election (Lang and Lang, 1968).

Potentially, exit polling offers an alternative method of obtaining accurate information about the voting population and how they voted on school district levy proposals. The results can be used to develop an accurate voter profile. Accurate knowledge of voter perceptions and voting patterns in precincts of the school district can be used to create a campaign strategy with a greater probability of success. The purpose of this study was to explore the use of exit polling in an urban school district levy election. The results offer an exploration of the feasibility of exit polling as an alternative to traditional methods of assessing voter attitudes. Data obtained from the exit polling technique was used to analyze the outcome of a school district levy renewal election of May 3, 1988. The information provided by the analysis was available for planning a campaign for a tax levy increase election held the following August.

Background

Washington Local School District (WLS) is an independent school district located almost entirely within the city limits of Toledo, Ohio. District enrollment is approximately 7,500 pupils and the annual operating budget is approximately 35 million dollars. After experiencing rapid growth in student enrollment, facilities, and operating budget during the previous two decades, WLS was faced with declining enrollment and associated fiscal problems throughout the eighties. Expenditures were reduced as enrollments declined by closing four buildings and

reducing staff by 213 positions, largely through attrition. Although the voters were known to reject levy issues the first time they appeared on the ballot, needed support for millage increases was usually apparent in the next election. The most recent levy election had been in November of 1985 when the district passed a 5.5 mill operating levy for a three-year period.

Faced with an expected deficit of 2.3 million dollars at the end of the 1987-88 school year, largely due to increased expenditures for district employee groups, the Washington Local school board voted to place a four mill levy increase on the November, 1987 ballot. The November issue was defeated by a slim margin -- 8,042 yes votes to 7,805 no votes. The superintendent found the results hard to explain and described the results as "a real shock" (Angle & Lane, 1987). Relations among the school board, administrators, teachers, other employees had been good, and a citizens' advisory group had been working assiduously for the past two years at selling the school district residents on the value of supporting the school district.

The school board voted to place a 6.5 mill levy on the February ballot. The superintendent said the district intended to improve the levy campaign by making use of levy supporters to do more house-to-house canvassing. The February measure was also defeated by a narrow margin, 418 votes. The vote was 3,415 in favor of the levy and 3,833 against it.

The district still faced a 1.5 million dollar operating deficit and the 5.5 mill levy, which had been passed three years ago, was scheduled to expire in 1988.

Table I, Phase 1, Steps Taken by WLS to Reduce Deficit

Effective	Affected Positions/Areas	1987/88	1988/89
02-2-88	Impose hiring freeze	-	-
02-2-88	Eliminated nurse, counselor, two custodial, purchasing agent, assistant principal, and bookkeeping clerk positions to date	$116,660	$260,119
03-02-88	Eliminate field trips	12,000	30,000
02-29-88	Eliminate early release and activity bus routes	7,517	20,195
02-29-88	Increase lunch prices	13,000	39,000
02-18-88	Eliminate discretionary professional leaves	6,000	10,000
02-18-88	Eliminate funding for national competitions	4,000	4,000
02-27-88	Eliminate building openings on weekends except where previously contracted	2,000	10,000
02-18-88	Eliminate summer theater	962	962
06-01-88	Increase elementary summer school tuition	500	500
02-18-88	Eliminate short-term substitutes for teacher aides, library media clerks, secretaries, storekeeper, and custodians	7,000	22,183
02-18-88	Eliminate mailing academic deficiency reports	1,333	4,000
1987-88	**Expenditure Reductions**	$175,972	$430,959
07-01-88	Reduce 1 custodial supervisor		33,760
08-29-88	Reduce 1 associate principal		58,205
08-29-88	Reduce 3 teacher aides		44,741
08-29-88	Reduce 2 auxiliary employees		6,595
08-29-88	Eliminate Outdoor Education		9,070
08-29-88	Eliminate HS bus transportation		66,639
08-29-88	Eliminate elementary intramurals and athletics		23,381
08-29-88	Eliminate junior high athletics and performing music		50,604
08-29-88	Eliminate freshman athletics		29,054
08-29-88	Eliminate Fall Play		963
08-29-88	Eliminate elementary activity bus		4,748
08-29-88	Eliminate purchase of consumable workbooks for grades 2-6 in spelling, handwriting, English		6,000
08-29-88	Reduce periods assigned to Independent Study		19,530
08-29-88	Eliminate computerized scheduling		

Table II, Further Reductions to Take Effect if Renewal Levy Failed

Affected Positions or Areas	1988-89 Savings
Eliminate K-8 bussing for pupils who live less than two miles from school. Eliminate 16 bus driver positions and one bus mechanic position	$ 164,296
Eliminate all extracurricular activities	212,045
Eliminate all adult education and apprenticeship courses	49,220
Collect student fees for all consumable material	65,000
Eliminate all weekend activities	9,000
Eliminate 1 adult education principal position Eliminate 1 assistant principal for activities Eliminate 1 vocational supervisor Eliminate 1 substance abuse coordinator	182,077
Reduce summer mowing	31,430
Eliminate junior high industrial arts, home economics, and exploratory foreign language programs	58,418
Eliminate two unfunded elementary reading teachers	58,316
Eliminate HS independent study program	19,530
Phase 2 Total Expenditure Reductions	$ 849,332

The board responded by approving a number of steps designed to reduce expenditures and increase revenues. The first phase of budgetary steps, seen in Table I, was to be put into effect without regard to the outcome of the May levy renewal election. The second phase, presented in Table II, would take effect if the May renewal failed to gain approval. In addition, the possibility of a merger between WLS and Toledo Public Schools was discussed by board members with

the public. The board determined to place the renewal levy on the May ballot. After the May election, the third attempt at passage of the new millage levy would be scheduled for either the August or November election.

One of the difficulties in planning a levy campaign is that a specific tactic can both win and lose votes; i.e., voter registration drives result in higher numbers of both "Yes" and "No" voters. A selective application of such tactics could maximize votes won and minimize votes lost. In essence, the groundwork for such a campaign strategy would be laid by (1) surveying the knowledge and attitude of the voters toward the issues related to the levy proposal; (2) surveying the voters to determine their demographic characteristics; and (3) use the information gathered in the first two steps to develop campaign tactics for each of the precincts or neighborhoods of the district. Obviously, accurate information is needed for this approach to levy campaigning to be successful. Unfortunately, except for the number of voters who had voted yes and the number who had voted no, WLS campaign planners had learned little about the reasons behind the two consecutive defeats.

The surprised and frustrated school officials and campaign workers had little information from which to discern the causes for the election defeat. Plans were made to collect information concerning the impending new levy proposal from a sample of the voters leaving the polling places at the May 3rd levy renewal election. An analysis of the information collected could lead to a better

understanding of the May 3rd election results and a basis for improved planning for the upcoming new levy election.

Procedure

Forty-five educational administration graduate students participated in the data collection effort. The previous election results were analyzed by polling place to determine the number of interviewers to assign to each polling place, and each of the interviewers was assigned according to the expected turnout at one of the 29 election sites. Three of the district's 32 polling places were not included because of the small number of ballots expected to be cast there. From one to three interviewers were assigned to each polling place. The interviewers were instructed to collect 20 completed surveys or to stay one and a half hours, whichever occurred first. In order to obtain the greatest number of completed surveys, each voter exiting from the polls was asked to complete a survey during the period the interviewer was present.

As a result of this quota sampling technique, the sample was forced to be representative of the population of voters, but is limited because it is not truly representative (Berger & Patchner, 1988). Had additional resources been available, a skip interval sampling technique could have been used to select respondents. A total of 10,307 votes were cast in the May election. As discussed earlier, the sample was not chosen randomly and, consequently, can not be considered representative of the population of voters. However, it is worth noting that 77.6% of the sample indicated that they had voted in favor of the levy

renewal issue, and the election returns revealed that 77.3% had voted in favor of the proposal.

Survey Construction

Knowledge questions were included in the survey because of their utility in designing and implementing information programs or advertising campaigns. As Sudman & Bradburn (1982) point out, information on the current public level of knowledge is needed before an effective information campaign can be implemented. To reduce the threatening aspect of these questions, they were asked as opinions and phrases such as "do you happen to know" or "can you recall" were used. In addition, attitude questions were formulated according to guidelines suggested by Sudman and Bradburn (1982).

The survey questions were selected for their contribution to developing an understanding of the election results. Some questions sought to determine the validity of public speculation concerning the causes of the previous defeats and others were gleaned from the literature concerning school levy elections. As an example of the latter, the bulk of research concerning the proposition that voter income is related to voting behavior supports the relationship (Hatley & Burlingame, 1972; Piele & Hall, 1973). As a result, information was sought concerning the income level of the sample of exiting voters. Other areas of information were knowledge of the financial condition of the district, reductions in programs, percentage of the operating budget provided by residential property tax; percentage of revenue provided by local, state, and federal sources; and reasons for the impending deficit.

Results

Altogether, 792 completed survey questionnaires were collected during the exit poll conducted during the WLS levy renewal election on May 3, 1988. Approximately 10,000 votes were cast in the election. The responses were solicited as the voters left the polling place. A cross-tabulation of the responses with the 29 polling places provides an indication of the support for a five mill increase (see Table III). Generally, the respondents were in favor of a new five mill levy:

- 47% indicated they would either definitely vote "Yes" or were leaning toward voting "Yes."
- 19% were not sure how they would vote.
- 31% would either definitely vote "No" or were leaning toward voting "No."

Since a simple majority is required for passage of the levy, more than 47% was needed. However, only about 15% of the voters who were not sure were needed to decide to vote "Yes" in order to pass the proposal. By contrast, the votes of all those who reported that they would definitely vote "No," were leaning toward voting "No," and all those who were unsure were needed to defeat the new millage proposal.

The data presented in Table III can also be used to identify areas of the district with high percentages in favor, unsure, and opposed to the new millage. The polling places are ranked in order of the percentage responding "Definitely

Table III, Polling Places by Support for New Levy Proposal

Poll Site	No Response	Definitely No	Leaning No	Not Sure	Leaning Yes	Definitely Yes	Row Total
ALC	0	4	0	2	4	10	20
	0	20	0	10	20	50	2.5
Armory	0	4	3	2	9	6	24
	0	16.7	12.5	8.3	37.5	25	3.0
Bus Gar	1	3	0	3	4	8	19
	5.3	15.8	0	15.8	21.1	42.1	2.4
ChristK	2	3	3	7	9	10	34
	5.9	8.8	8.8	20.6	26.5	29.4	4.3
ConnW	0	21	7	14	7	17	66
	0	31.8	10.6	21.2	10.6	25.8	8.3
CovPrsb	0	1	0	0	2	0	3
	0	33.3	0	0	66.7	0	.4
Elmhrst	0	11	2	3	3	1	20
	0	55	10	15	15	5	2.5
GraceL	0	0	0	0	1	1	2
	0	0	0	0	50	50	.3
Greenw	0	5	3	7	0	8	23
	0	21.7	13	30.4	0	34.8	2.9
Harvest	0	9	1	2	5	6	23
	0	39.1	4.3	8.6	21.7	26.1	2.9
Hiawth	0	2	3	3	2	3	13
	0	15.4	23.1	23.1	15.4	23.1	1.6
HopeM	2	3	3	3	5	8	24
	8.3	12.5	12.5	12.5	20.8	33.3	3.0
Jackm	1	5	1	7	4	5	23
	4.3	21.7	4.3	30.4	17.4	21.7	2.9
Judson	0	5	0	4	3	12	24
	0	20.8	0	16.7	12.5	50.0	3.0
LaskeyF	0	0	2	3	3	1	9
	0	0	22.2	33.3	33.3	11.1	1.1
Lincoln	0	6	3	9	6	16	40
	0	15	7.5	22.5	15	40	5.1
McGreg	0	7	4	8	3	12	34
	0	20.6	11.8	23.5	8.8	35.3	4.3
Meadwv	1	8	4	9	10	29	61
	1.6	13.1	6.6	14.8	16.4	47.5	7.7
Monac	2	10	3	6	6	13	40
	5	15	7.5	15	15	21.5	5.1
OttRM	0	1	1	4	4	9	19
	0	5.3	5.3	21.1	21.1	47.4	2.4
OttRS	0	3	0	2	0	2	7
	0	42.9	0	28.6	0	28.6	.9
RegCli	3	7	12	8	15	18	63
	4.8	11.1	19	12.7	23.8	28.6	8
ShoreF	0	1	3	3	3	2	12
	0	8.3	25	25	25	16.7	1.5
ShoreS	0	2	4	6	7	1	20
	0	10	20	30	35	5	2.5
StClem	2	11	8	9	5	10	45
	4.4	24.4	17.8	20	11.1	22.2	5.7
StMatt	0	6	2	5	6	4	23
	0	26.1	8.7	21.7	26.1	17.4	2.9
StartHS	2	2	1	4	6	8	23
	8.7	8.7	4.3	17.4	26.1	34.8	2.9
TrilM	1	15	6	13	2	10	47
	2.1	31.9	12.8	27.7	4.3	21.3	5.9
WrnrS	0	6	4	5	6	5	10
	0	19.4	12.9	19.4	16.1	32.3	3.9
Column Total	17	161	83	152	139	240	792
	2.1	20.3	10.5	19.2	17.6	30.3	100

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No," "Leaning Toward No," "Not Sure," "Leaning Toward Yes," and "Definitely Yes." Simply put, the key to winning levy elections has been getting the "Yes" voters to the polls. This information may be used to help in targeting favorable areas of the district for voter registration drives, transportation to the polls, and the provision of babysitting services for voting parents. Campaign efforts may also be intensified in the areas with a high percentage of voters who are unsure of how they will vote.

A crosstabulation revealed an association between lack of knowledge and rejection of the new levy proposal. Reports of voter attitude toward a new five mill levy were crosstabulated with estimates of the financial health of the district in Table IV. The percentage of respondents who reported that the district health

Table IV, Perception of District Financial Health and Support for New Levy

Financial Health	Support for New Levy: No Response	Definitely No	Leaning No	Not Sure	Leaning Yes	Definitely Yes	Row Total
No Response	2	0	0	0	1	6	9
	22.2	0	0	0	11.1	66.7	1.1
Excellent	1	7	5	6	3	6	28
	3.6	25	17.9	21.4	10.7	21.4	3.5
Okay	7	87	36	64	51	49	294
	2.4	29.6	12.2	21.8	17.3	16.7	37.1
Poor	3	34	29	52	61	159	338
	.9	10.1	8.6	15.4	18	47	42.7
Not Sure	4	31	13	30	23	19	120
	3.3	25.8	10.8	25	19.2	15.8	15.2
Column Total	17	161	83	152	139	240	792
	2.1	20.3	10.5	19.2	17.6	30.3	100

was poor decreases from 47% in the "Definitely Yes" column to as low as 10% and 8%, respectively, in the "Definitely No" and "Leaning Toward No" columns. Also, the columns "Definitely No" and "Not Sure" had the highest percentages in the "Not Sure" (of the financial health of the district" row.

Similarly, in Table V, 50% of those who said they knew nothing of the planned district reductions voted "No," and another 43% said they were unsure of how they would vote. While a strong association between levels of knowledge and support for passage of the levy is intuitively apparent, increasing information to the voters may or may not remedy the situation. The cause of the lack of voter knowledge may be attributed to a number of factors. The respondents may be disinterested in district news or may disregard messages that could inform them. Whatever the cause, however, the district may need to realign district public relations objectives to ameliorate this problem.

Table V, Knowledge of Reductions and Support for New Levy

Knowledge Reductions	Support for New Levy: No Response	Definitely No	Leaning No	Not Sure	Leaning Yes	Definitely Yes	Row Total
No Response	3	1	0	0	2	1	7
	42.9	14.3	0	0	28.6	14.3	.9
Great Deal	5	59	34	58	42	160	358
	1.4	16.5	9.5	16.2	11.7	44.7	45.2
Fair Amount	5	75	35	71	81	65	332
	1.5	22.6	10.5	21.4	24.4	19.6	41.9
Very Little	4	19	14	17	14	13	81
	4.9	23.5	17.3	21	17.3	16	10.2
Nothing	0	7	0	6	0	1	14
	0	50	0	42.9	0	7.1	1.8
Column Total	17	161	83	152	139	240	792
	2.1	20.3	10.5	19.2	17.6	30.3	100

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Conclusion

Exit polling is an approach that can provide information needed to increase the effectiveness of school tax campaign strategies. Given the finite resources of time, money, and energy available for campaign spending, the practical importance of supporting decisions with accurate data is underscored. School districts that are dependent on voter approval to meet revenue needs should consider implementing this technique. Exit polling is particularly recommended if elections occur in close succession or it is important to understand the results of an election.

As a footnote, a new five mill levy proposal was passed by the WLS voters on August, 1988, with 58.9% voting in favor.

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